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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study explored teacher-student relationships in classrooms for adolescents identified as emotionally disturbed or behaviorally disordered. These children are often the most difficult students to teach, but teachers who communicate caring can be powerful resources for children who feel frustrated, helpless, and angry. Previous research suggests that teachers who are successful in working with socioemotionally impaired students have the underlying attribute of caring deeply about their students, employ a child-centered approach to teaching, and display empathy in seeking to understand their students' worlds. In-depth phenomenological interviewing procedures were used to explore teacher-student relationships for five rural Mexican American students in programs for emotional/behavioral disabilities and their teachers. Three interviews each with the five students (ages 12-18) and four of their teachers focused on subjects' perceptions of their experiences in special education. The teachers verbalized a desire to connect with their students on a personal level, felt that developing a healthy relationship with their students was part of their teacher role, and saw these personal connections as necessary for a student's positive transformation in the school community. All students spoke about examples of teacher caregiving qualities that were important to them; their narratives suggested the need for a teacher-student relationship based on empathy and unconditional positive regard. (Contains 18 references.) (SV)

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RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS AS CAREGIVERS: VOICES OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Special education students often have not been successful, are not well adjusted, and have had lifelong problems or enough baggage to make them, as some teachers say, "the most difficult students to teach." With these factors and this description, how do teachers make meaning in the classroom environment with these students? And what is it about the teaching-learning experience that makes a difference to these children?

Teachers *as caregivers* are in the forefront to be rich and powerful resources for children who feel frustrated, helpless, and angry. As noted by Deiro (1996), "Children value adults who value them. Thus children who are living in seemingly intolerable situations but have a prosocial adult outside their home environment who cares about them will adjust their behavior to carefully safeguard that relationship" (pp. 3-4). Noddings (1984) stresses that student-teacher relationships provide a rich arena in which students are transformed by an ethic of care.

A qualitative study explored teacher-student relationships in classrooms for adolescents identified as emotionally disturbed/behaviorally disordered. These students exhibited one or more of the following behaviors:

> behavior disorders over a long period of time which adversely affect educational performance;
> an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
> an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;
> inappropriate types of behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances;
> a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and/or
> a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975)

In a mental health report entitled "Mad, Bad, Sad, and Can't Add" (Friedman & Kutash, 1986), many students identified as emotionally/behaviorally disabled were found to exhibit disengagement from their teachers and school environment. However, research has shown that the dropout rate and poor academic performance of these students can be improved through supportive and positive classroom environments. This includes increasing self-esteem and promoting positive attitudes through the facilitative environmental characteristics of trust, acceptance, and respect (see, e.g., Conant, 1992; Good & Brophy, 1997; Skooglund, 1997; Wooten &McCroskey, 1996). Morse (1996) found those teachers who successfully work with socioemotionally impaired students have the underlying attribute of caring deeply about their students. Moreover, Morse (1996) reminded us:

> It is not enough for a teacher to feel that he or she is a caring professional. Most of us believe we are. The task is to communicate our caring to the youngster so that she or he feels cared about. There is obviously no single way to establish such a bond of trust. Those "exemplar" teachers each achieved this in a unique mode, just as caring parents demonstrate their care in various ways. (p. 108)

Maily (1975) stated that a child-centered orientation to teaching is crucial when working with students identified as emotionally/behaviorally disabled. Teacher qualities for these students may be instrumental in determining student attitudes toward placement and the quality of intervention services. Teacher empathy or understanding is a valued teacher characteristic most often mentioned by the students. Morse (1996) contended that exemplary teachers of students with emotional/behavioral disabilities are those who knew their students and had empathy for the extreme stress in their lives.

Morgan and Reinhart (1991), who have written extensively in the area of teacher empathy, defined teacher empathy as the "teacher's understanding of the meaning to the student of the classroom experiences in which they

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are mutually engaged" (p. 33). In essence, empathy means caring about the student and seeking to understand that student from his or her own frame of reference. Morgan and Reinhart also articulated the need for empathetic teachers in classrooms for children with emotional disabilities:

> Empathy is critical to good teaching, especially to teaching emotionally disturbed/ behaviorally disordered students. We work with youngsters who perceive their worlds differently than most people do. Teachers who work with these children must have insight and understanding. Empathy provides the ability to know the students' world in the way that they live it, to interpret that understanding back to the child, and then provide boundaries of reality so that they may function more competently. (1991, p. 340)

Hearing Teacher and Student Voices

Qualitative research requires that the researcher examines and attempts to understand human behavior in its social context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This type of research captures participants in their own terms--their emotions, the way in which they view their worlds, their thoughts on their experiences, and their perceptions and values (see, e.g., Geertz, 1973).

Seidman's In-depth Phenomenological Interviewing procedures were utilized to help understand teacher-student relationships for rural students enrolled in programs for emotional/behavioral disabilities. In-depth interviewing is a vehicle in which to access abstract and complex social and educational issues and place them in a very realistic and concrete framework (Seidman, 1991). In this case, it allowed these researchers to hear voices of teachers and students. This model of interviewing involved three 45- or 90-minute interviews with each participant (students 45 minutes and teachers 90 minutes). The first interview focused on the historical background of the participants as it related to what events led to their placement or teaching in special education. The second interview focused on the present-day experiences in special education. The third interview asked the participants to reflect on the *meaning* of their experiences in special education.

Participants were five Mexican-American adolescents (ages 12-18) enrolled in southwestern rural public school special education classes that met the state and federal guidelines for placement in programs for emotional/behavioral disabilities. All students participating in this study were in a self-contained classroom for at least one period a day, with most in a self-contained classroom for the majority of the day. One special education teacher from each of the four selected classrooms was also asked to participate in this study by being interviewed. A tape-recorder was utilized during each of the interviews. All three interviews took place approximately one week apart over a three-month period.

Experiences shared by the students and teachers interviewed each portray a different story. Yet, the caregiving qualities of teachers connected these students to education and made meaning in the lives of adolescents. As Benard (1995) pointed out, "An ethic of caring is obviously not a program, or strategy, per se, but rather a way of being in the world, a way of relating to youth . . . that conveys compassion, understanding, respect, and interest." These teachers believed that caregiving was one of their primary roles as a teacher. This supported Brophy and Evertson's (1976) finding that "teachers' role definitions for themselves... [are] among the most fundamental teacher characteristics associated with teaching success" (p. 141). Robert Bloom (1983) stated:

> Time and again, positively and negatively, the emotional generators of our adult professional personalities are energized by the youngsters we teach and the circumstances in which we teach them. Refusal to recognize the emotional impact students have upon us and how that affects our professional work impairs our ability to establish rapport with youths, limits our instructional effectiveness, and establishes us as prime candidates for the despair and depression of teacher burnout. Accepting special education's interpersonal underworld allows us to disengage from unproductive conflicts, to forego battles with windmills in exchange for struggles with real dragons, and as a marvelous extra, to continue to grow as teachers and as human beings. (p. 215)

Teacher Voices

Though human behavior is complex and qualitative research can generate multiple interpretations and realities, the words of participants provide the meaning to life that is often missing with quantitative data. Hearing teachers' voices allows others to understand their experiences from a social, cultural, and educational context. The

voices of four teachers who worked with and taught rural students with emotional/behavioral disabilities are summarized. Each summary expresses the teacher's philosophy about caregiving in his/her special education classroom.

Ms. Dee: Teacher of Pablo

Ms. Dee is an African-American teacher, age range 31-40, who holds a bachelor's degree. She has been a special education teacher for approximately 10 years. Her background includes six years of working with students who have specific learning disabilities and four years of working with children identified as emotionally disturbed/behaviorally disordered. She served eight students in her class, seven Mexican-American males and one Euro-American male. Pablo was the student interviewed from her class. It is important to express the positive attitudes that Ms. Dee had about Pablo. Ms. Dee had effectively identified not only Pablo's weaknesses but also his strengths. One can sense that Ms. Dee was not only interested in Pablo from an academic perspective, but she tried to understand him in a more intimate manner. She reflected the care and high regard she holds for her students. She clearly stated that her classroom is a transitory setting where students learn the skills needed to move into general education.

Ms. Johnson: Teacher of Angela and Jaime

Ms. Johnson is Euro-American teacher, age range 41-50, who has a Master's degree in Education. She has 12-15 years of special education experience. In addition, she has approximately nine years of social service experience. She currently serves 6-10 students identified as emotionally disturbed/behaviorally disordered. All of her students are identified as Mexican-American. She has one female in her class. She noted her special relationship with each student saying, "It's a relationship thing that develops as you spend time with that child. It is like surrogate parenting, but I look at it more like human interaction with the human relationship."

Ms. Davidson: Teacher of Thomas

Ms. Davidson is an African-American special education teacher who has been working in the field of education for approximately 25 years. She currently holds a Master's degree. At present she serves eight students. Six are identified as Mexican-American, and two are identified as African-American. Ms. Davidson indicated that she felt five of her students had used or abused drugs or alcohol within the current academic year. Ms. Davidson, like Ms. Dee and Ms. Johnson, valued her students and believed that the teacher-student relationship is imperative to student improvement. She viewed student histories not as barriers but rather as points of acceptance, where she saw the adolescents she teaches as human beings with needs.

Mr. Leonard: Teacher of David

Mr. Leonard is an African-American male, age range 41-50, who has been a special education teacher for approximately 4-6 years. He served 6-10 students, 50% of which are Mexican-American and 50% of which are Euro-American, all of which are in classrooms for adolescents identified as emotionally/behaviorally disabled. For students who have felt rejected by virtually all significant adults, Mr. Leonard listened to them without judgment and accusations, producing profound transformation in his students.

From the complete teacher interviews, one was made aware of the unique relationships that students have with their teachers. The teacher-student relationship consisted of academic help, but, as importantly, it also consisted of being available to listen to the adolescent, empathizing with the adolescent, providing boundaries for the adolescent, and offering advice when necessary. All special education teachers as caregivers appeared to place a very high priority on relational issues with the students.

Student Voices

In the teacher interviews, educators verbalized a desire to connect with their students on a personal level and saw these personal connections as the necessary ingredient toward a student's positive transformation in the school community. These special education teachers indicated that they spent a significant amount of time engaged with their students and saw part of their teacher role as developing a healthy relationship with their students. With

student voices, one saw that the meaningful connections in the student-teacher relationship were established through caregiving qualities of teachers.

Pablo: Student of Ms. Dee

Pablo is a 13-year-old student who is in a self-contained program for students with emotional/behavioral problems. According to Pablo, his problems started immediately prior to the fourth grade and stemmed from the death of his grandfather, the accusations made by his family that he had "killed" his grandfather, and the relentless teasing he received about the death of his grandfather. Pablo also chronicled his own depressive behaviors, which were masked by anger, violence, and aggression. At school Pablo saw himself as aggressive and the school system as unjust and differential in its treatment of students. When asked about his current school life, Pablo stated, "I feel much better . . . way much better." In fact, what one saw was Pablo becoming engaged in the school process and feeling valued. Although Pablo had some behavioral problems in his placement, Pablo viewed the school as a social arena in which he felt integrated.

Jaime: Student of Ms. Johnson

Jaime is a 14-year-old student enrolled in a self-contained class for students with behavioral and emotional problems. He had been in the program for approximately three months. Ordered by the courts and with the recommendation from mental health personnel, Jaime was enrolled in this school program as part of his rehabilitation. Jaime had a history of juvenile delinquency, psychiatric hospitalization, and severe family distress. Like Pablo, Jaime felt alienated from the school environment until entry into special education. Interestingly, Jaime readily articulated that he had a friendship with his teacher and that she genuinely cared for him.

Angela: Student of Ms. Johnson

Angela is a 14-year-old adolescent who attempted suicide because she felt that she would be "one less problem for her mother." Angela saw her placement in special education as therapeutic and beneficial. She verbalized great appreciation for the professionals who helped find the most appropriate placement for her. Although Angela was afraid to enter her new school, her special education teacher, Ms. Johnson, and the educational assistant Mr. Valdez, valued Angela as an individual. Angela suffered from anxiety, depression, and feelings of apprehension, but she nonetheless found a safety net in special education.

Thomas: Student of Ms. Davidson

Thomas is a 14-year-old eighth grade student who had a history of juvenile delinquency and repeated school failure. Thomas saw the special education classroom as a place where he could receive the academic and psychological help he needed. He said that he was learning how to read and write and that his math skills continued to improve. Also important was his feeling that his special education teacher "explained" lessons to him and that she helped him more than the general education teachers. Student and teacher relational issues appeared to be an important element in his success. Like Pablo and Jaime, Thomas addressed the issue of a teacher being someone who is genuinely concerned about students, emotionally as well as academically.

David: Student of Mr. Leonard

David is an 18-year-old adolescent who has been in classes for behavior/emotional problems throughout his high school years. David was placed into a special education program following an attempted suicide and psychiatric hospitalization. One could sense that his successful intervention may have been partly due to the relationship he had with his teacher. Like the other students, David looked to the special education teacher not only as a person who teaches academics but also as a person he could respect and in whom he could confide. In return, his special education teacher was interested in David on a personal level.

Reflecting On The Voices

It is important to examine how the social systems in which students find themselves impede or promote a healing process. What is the role played by the school in augmenting or abating positive and negative behaviors?

The special education programs were therapeutic for the adolescents in this study, while other programs may exacerbate negative feelings within the adolescent at-risk for emotional degeneration. What appears to be crucial for these students were (a) the relationship they had with their teachers, (b) the feeling that they were valued by the teacher and/or school community, and (c) the belief that their placement into special education was intended to be restorative, rather than punitive.

The teacher appeared to be of utmost importance when working with students identified as emotionally/behaviorally disabled. All students interviewed spoke about or provided examples that demonstrated teacher caregiving qualities that were important to them. What appeared to be pertinent in each of the full student narratives was the need for a student-teacher relationship that was based on empathy and unconditional positive regard.

Pablo, who had been in special education for nine months, provided examples, which demonstrated his integration into the school community. Pablo felt valued in his special education classroom, and he said that he was doing much better at his new school. This was remarkable considering that Pablo had a long-term history of aggression, violence, depression, and school failure.

Jaime felt that special education provided him with an opportunity for positive change. Jaime attributed his success, in part, to his teacher and the instructional assistant. He felt that his teacher understood him, listened to him, and befriended him without judgment.

Angela, like Jaime and Pablo, felt that special education placement had been enormously beneficial on both an academic and emotional level. For Angela, who spent the past three years avoiding the school environment, the fact that she came to school daily was important. Much of her progress was attributed to her teacher and the instructional assistant. She believed that both individuals genuinely care for her and were empathetic to her needs and experiences. This was instrumental to her positive development.

Thomas had been in special education for approximately three years and saw special education as an arena where he was learning new skills and receiving needed emotional help. Thomas felt that he had a teacher who finally explained things. For Thomas, who stated that he had not had many positive experiences with teachers, this teacher's understanding lessened his own anxiety and increased his own feeling of self-worth.

David had also been in special education on a long-term basis for approximately four years. David saw his special education program as an integral part of his own emotional-psychological development. David stated that his teacher supported him completely and was a trusted confidant. In fact, David provided examples where he talked to his teacher about personal problems, and his teacher offered him advice and a listening ear. For David, who experienced a past of drugs and alcohol, an attempted suicide, emotional abandonment, and inconsistent parenting, the fact that he had established a trusting relationship with an adult was encouraging.

For the majority of adolescents interviewed, special education not only provided the students an individualized academic program but also an opportunity to form meaningful relationships with an adult in a healthy and nonthreatening manner. This may be the first healthy relationship based on respect and genuineness that these adolescents had experienced. When asked about their special education program, the majority of the students didn't want to talk about "what" they did all day, but rather they chose to talk about their relationships with other individuals within their classrooms, with the majority of their conversations focused on the caregiving of their teachers.

The interviews point specifically to the importance of teachers as caregivers. Caregiving qualities are critical in student-teacher relationships. Perhaps, the student-teacher relationship provides a lifeline of hope for these students, who, in the past, have felt that no adults really cared for them.

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